

# Bears in North Carolina:

*A Survey of Public Views*



Dain Palmer  
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission  
[dain.palmer@ncwildlife.org](mailto:dain.palmer@ncwildlife.org)  
[www.ncwildlife.org](http://www.ncwildlife.org)

## INTRODUCTION

The black bear is the only species of bear in North Carolina. Black bear populations in North Carolina have increased from the 1970s through the 2000s. While numbers have started to stabilize in many coastal areas in recent years, they've continued to grow in many mountain areas. At the same time, bears occupy more areas of North Carolina, and the human population has grown—increasing the number of human/bear interactions. Human/bear interactions can be positive or negative, ranging from people observing a bear to a bear causing damage to property. To more effectively manage bears in North Carolina, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission is developing a long-range bear management plan that includes identifying critical bear management issues and determining public views on these issues.

This study examined the views of North Carolina residents regarding bears and bear management and explored the level of human/bear interactions that were tolerated by various groups of citizens. Because bear hunting is a main tool for managing bear populations, understanding the views of the public about bear hunting is also important.

## METHODS

### Focus group

Researchers conducted focus groups with citizens from Buncombe, Caswell, and Craven counties in February and March 2005 to explore in-depth some topics related to bear management and to test a draft of a mail survey.

### Surveys

A survey, designed with input from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission Black Bear Committee, asked several questions about personal experiences with bears. These include values and concerns related to bears, tolerance for human/bear interactions, views on bear populations in North Carolina, acceptability of bear management actions, knowledge of bears, and demographic and background information.

Beginning in May 2005, surveys were sent to a random selection of 12,810 North Carolina residents. About a week later, survey recipients received reminders. All nonrespondents were sent up to two additional follow-up mailings.

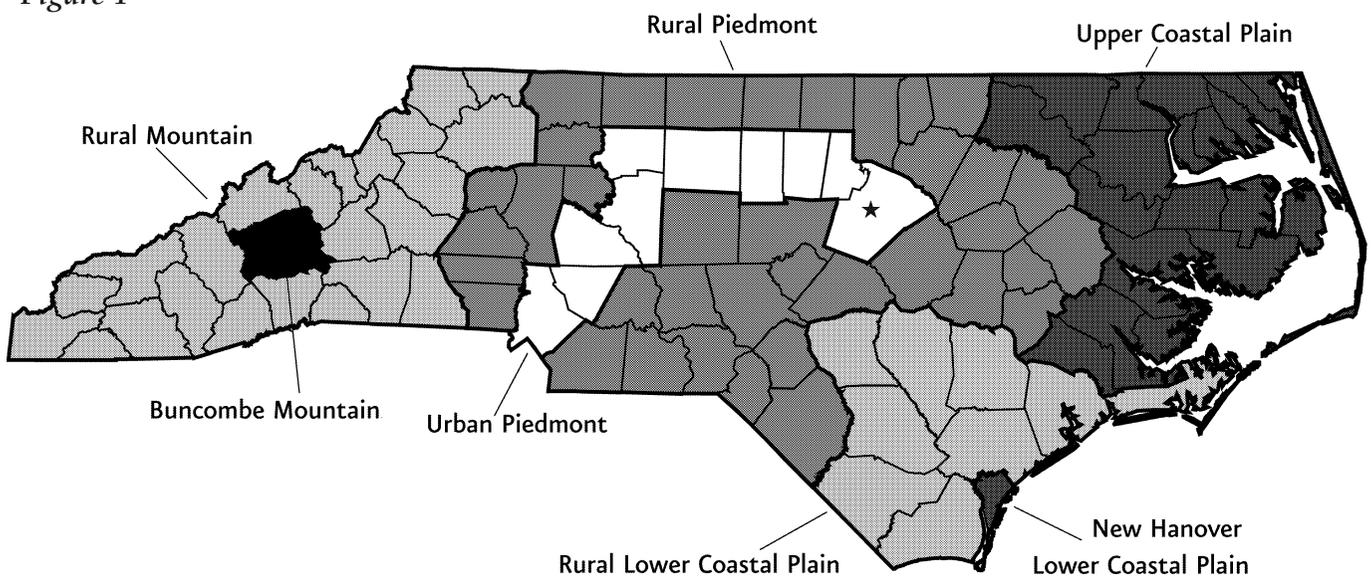
## RESULTS

### Regions

To compare rural and urban residents in areas with and without a bear hunting season in 2005, we divided the state into seven regions (Figure 1).

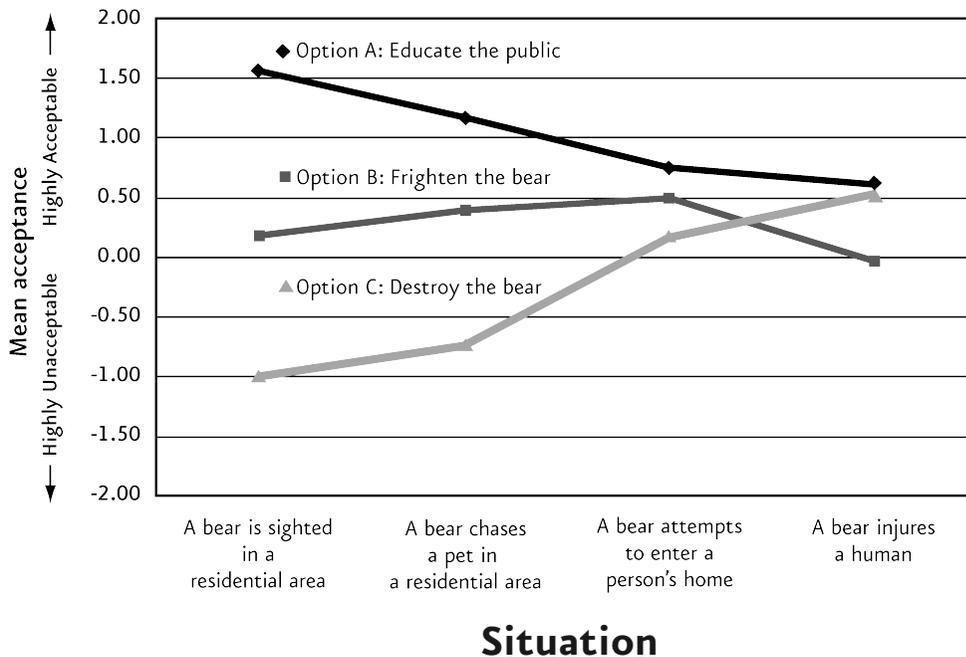
## Survey Regions

Figure 1



# Dealing with Human/Bear Interactions

Figure 2



## Respondents

North Carolina residents returned 3,933 surveys. The adjusted response rate, calculated by omitting incorrect addresses and persons ineligible to respond, was 35%.

Respondents to the survey had different demographic characteristics than the general North Carolina population. A lower proportion of respondents to the survey were age 16 to 44, female, had a high school degree or less, and had gross household incomes of less than \$40,000 than the North Carolina population.

Seventy-five percent of survey respondents reported participating in one or more wildlife-related activities.

## Interactions with bears

Thirty-eight percent of respondents indicated they had observed or photographed a bear in the wild in North Carolina, while only 1% reporting having a bear/vehicle accident. Rural Mountain (64%) and Buncombe Mountain (72%) residents were more likely than expected to have had interactions with bears in North Carolina.

## Knowledge of bears

Most respondents (65%) reported having very little or some knowledge of bears.

## Benefits and negative impact of bears

Most survey respondents (85%) agreed that it is important to know that bears exist in North Carolina and that the presence of bears is a sign of a healthy environment (70%).

A minority of survey respondents were concerned about public safety threats by bears (31%), bear/vehicle accidents (44%), damage to personal property or crops by bears (33%), or threats to pets or livestock by bears (36%).

## Attitudes about bears

Most (61%) respondents were concerned about future bear populations in North Carolina. Buncombe Mountain residents (32%) were more likely than expected to strongly agree that they were concerned about future North Carolina bear populations. Forty-eight percent of respondents believed that the money that people spend to view, hunt, or photograph bears in North Carolina is important to the economy.

## Dealing with human/bear interactions

The survey asked about the acceptability of educating the public, frightening the bear, or destroying the bear in various situations involving human/bear interactions (Figure 2). The acceptability of educating the public decreased with situations that were more threatening to humans, while destroying the bear became more acceptable the higher the threat to people.

### **Preferred levels of human/bear interactions**

A quarter (25%) of respondents preferred that no bears exist in their areas. One-half (50%) preferred that bears are occasionally sighted in rural areas. Significantly fewer Rural Mountain (14%) and Buncombe Mountain (10%) residents, and significantly more Rural Piedmont (32%) and Urban Piedmont (26%) residents preferred that no bears exist in their areas than expected.

### **Bear hunting**

Most (63%) respondents agreed that bear hunting, when properly managed, is compatible with viable bear populations, and 44% agreed that it is important for people to have opportunities to hunt bears in North Carolina. Most (74%) respondents said they would support regulated bear hunting in their area if wildlife managers determined it was necessary.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Most survey respondents said they believed it was important to have bears in North Carolina. This means that bear conservation efforts in North Carolina are likely to be supported by most North Carolinians. At the same time, most respondents admitted having below average knowledge of bears. Thus, opportunities exist for more public education about bears and bear management.

This study indicates that residents who live in areas with more human/bear interactions are more tolerant of such interactions than residents who live in areas with fewer human/bear interactions. This may be because residents living within occupied bear range have better knowledge of bears and how to prevent conflicts than residents who currently live outside occupied bear range. Consequently, if the expansion of occupied bear range in North Carolina continues, North Carolinians who live in areas currently unoccupied by bears may be more likely than other residents to demand that wildlife managers take steps to prevent human/bear conflicts. Education will be of great importance in meeting these expected demands.

Most respondents would support bear hunting in their areas if wildlife managers determined it was necessary.

In cases where human safety is threatened, the study indicates that in North Carolina, lethal wildlife management activities, such as hunting, will be more acceptable than in cases where human safety is not threatened.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

For more information on bears and bear management, or for a full report of this study, visit [www.ncwildlife.org](http://www.ncwildlife.org).



Division of Wildlife Management  
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission  
1722 Mail Service Center  
Raleigh, NC 27699-1722

Get **N.C. Wildlife Update**—news including season dates, bag limits, legislative updates and more—delivered to your Inbox from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. Go to [www.ncwildlife.org/enews](http://www.ncwildlife.org/enews).



Thank you to the North Carolina residents who participated in focus groups or completed surveys.

This study was funded under the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program using state hunting license money and federal grant funds derived from federal excise taxes on sporting arms, ammunition, archery equipment, and handguns.